

External School Evaluation in Portugal – a glance at the impacts on curricular and pedagogical practices

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Abstract

Answering demands for an increase of accountability in terms of public education, and intending to lead to an improvement of the quality of education (Conselho Nacional de Educação, 2010), external school evaluation has been taking place in the continental territory of Portugal since 2006. All the schools having been evaluated once, in what is known as the 1st cycle of external evaluation, and a 2nd cycle of external evaluation is underway since 2011.

This paper presents a part of a national project funded by the Foundation for Science and Technology, which aims at identifying and describing the impacts and effects of external school evaluation¹. We frame external school evaluation as a contribution for the accountability of public service and for the improvement of practices and organizations (Bolívar, 2012). In particular, we will address impacts on pedagogical and curricular practices, inferred from the analysis of the «strengths» and «areas for improvement» identified in the external school evaluation reports of schools which have been evaluated in both cycles of external evaluation.

In order to achieve that, we have carried out a category-based content analysis, using the N-vivo 10 software, over a research *corpus* comprising 40% of all the reports of schools evaluated twice, half of which correspond to the schools with the highest appraisals, and the remaining half to schools with the lowest appraisals.

The results we have found when comparing the areas requiring improvement in the 1st cycle of evaluation, and the strengths found in the 2nd cycle of evaluation, suggest a positive impact of external school evaluation on teachers' curricular and pedagogical practices.

Keywords: External School Evaluation, curricular practices, pedagogical practices.

1. Introduction

The study presented in this communication stems from a larger ongoing research Project: “Impact and Effects of External School Evaluation on non-Higher Education Schools” which intends to uncover how external school evaluation taking place since 2006 has impacted schools. In particular, with this communication we intend to acknowledge curricular and pedagogical changes. In order to do so, our study has focused on schools which have been evaluated twice: in the first cycle of evaluation, which took place between 2006 and 2011 and in the second cycle of evaluation, which started in 2011 and is still underway.

When developing our research, we assumed the following presuppositions:

- External Evaluation (EE) influences the way schools are organized and how they function;
- The «opportunities for improvement» indicated in EE reports are subject to privileged attention from schools;
- EE appreciations focused on «what do we do well?» and «how can we improve?» (Rogers & Williams, 2007) motivate schools to change and improve.

Starting from these assumptions and in order to guide the study we present, we defined the following research questions:

- Which «strengths» are recognized by External School Evaluation (ESE)?

¹ Project «Impact and Effects of External School Evaluation on non-Higher Education Schools» is funded by the FCT



- Which «opportunities for improvement» are pointed out by ESE?
- What evolution has taken place, from the first cycle of ESE to the second, at the level of curricular and pedagogical changes?

Apart from this introduction, the text is structured according to four main topics: a brief background on ESE in Portugal; presentation of the methodology used for the study; presentation and discussion of results; and conclusion.

2. External School Evaluation in Portugal

The concept of quality is subject of intense debate, particularly as it is always contingent on the interests of the ones defining it, as well as their priorities and expectations. This complexity has fundamental implications on how such quality is assessed, and on the models chosen to do so (Coelho, Sarrico & Rosa, 2008), as well as on how the results of such an appraisal are used.

In a context in which more stress has been placed, on the one hand, on school autonomy and on the other, on accountability and responsibility of schools before society, External Evaluation of non higher education schools has been thought of and implemented as a mechanism aiming to respond to those demands. In Portugal, this process has begun in 2006 (CNE, 2010).

We believe that, as one of the main aspects of globalization, homogenization of educational discourses and policies is operated through internationally produced, diffused and affirmed key concepts (Seabra, Morgado, & Pacheco, 2012). Several transnational organizations are relevant to this process, including the OECD, World Bank and European Union. The concept of accountability and centrality which evaluation assumes in its scope, has been one such powerful concept, which has had deep impacts on the Portuguese sphere. Political, institutional and pedagogical forms of regulation stem from this concept. In this context, ESE is placed simultaneously as an instrument for political regulation, as it collects data which informs policy making by the central government, institutional regulation, as it determines, to some extent, what a high quality school is, and pedagogical regulation as it identifies which objectives, processes and results schools should pursue in a logic of «best practices».

ESE in Portugal was designed to be closely articulated with schools' internal evaluation processes, and with the process of designing autonomy contracts with schools, within a relation between schools, external evaluation and the ministry of education (Oliveira, *et al.*, 2006). As autonomy depends on the processes and results of evaluation, it operated a shift from a regulation based on objectives, norms and principals, to a form of regulation based on processes and results (Fialho, 2009; Pacheco & Seabra, 2013). In effect, ESE can be framed within two main European tendencies: decentralization, and benchmarking, that is, decentralization of means accompanied by results based regulation (Azevedo, 2005).

Underlining aspects related to the quality of practices and results, a self evaluation culture, the capacity of schools to be autonomous, the regulation of the educational system, accountability of schools before society and the implication of the educational community as a whole, ESE has assumed the following objectives:

- To foster a systematic questioning of schools regarding the quality of their practices and results;
- To articulate contributions from ESE with the culture and devices for schools' self evaluation;
- To strengthen schools' capacity for autonomy;
- To contribute to the regulation of the educational system;
- To contribute to a better knowledge of schools and the public service of education, fostering social participation in schools' lives (IGE, 2009: 7).

The process of ESE was coordinated by the General Inspection of Education (later General Inspection of Education and Science), and piloted in the year 2006. The model it assumed during the first cycle of ESE, (2006-2011), during which all schools in the continental territory of Portugal have been evaluated once (Oliveira *et al.*, 2006) is based on a referential portrayed in table 1.



| Domains | Factors |
|---|---|
| 1. Results | 1.1. Academic success 1.2. Valuing knowledge and learning 1.3. Behavior and Discipline 1.4. Participation and civic development |
| 2. Educational Service | 2.1. Articulation and sequence 2.2. Accompaniment of educational practice in the classroom 2.3. Differentiation and support 2.4. Encompassing curriculum and valuing of knowledge and learning |
| 3. School Organization and Management | 3.1. Conception, planning and development of activity 3.2. Human Resource Management 3.3. Management of financial resources 3.4. Participation of parents and other elements of the educational community 3.5. Equity and justice |
| 4. Leadership | 4.1. Vision and strategy 4.2. Motivation and commitment 4.3. Openness to innovation 4.4. Partnerships, protocols and projects |
| 5. Capacity for self-evaluation and improvement | 5.1. Self-evaluation 5.2. Sustainability of progress |

Table 1 – Referential of analysis of the 1st cycle of ESE (IGE, 2009).

In practice, ESE is carried out by teams of three elements: 2 inspectors, and an external element, usually a higher education professor, who visit schools for two to three days and gather data based on document analysis, interviews and observation. This team produces a public ESE report.

After the 1st cycle of ESE ended in 2011, the model was readjusted, and its objectives redefined, taking into account the quality schools movement and the European tendencies associating academic results, autonomy, and quality, based on accountability (Seabra, Morgado & Pacheco, 2012), thus centering on academic achievement (Almeida *et al.*, 2011). Changes to the model also addressed the recommendations of the National Council of Education (2010), which included the introduction of an «expected value», close to the idea of a school effect and allows for the framing of students' academic results by considering context variables, and the referential of analysis was simplified, integrating only three domains, each comprising three fields of analysis (Almeida *et al.*, 2011), as expressed in table 2.

| Domains | Fields of analysis |
|---------------------------|---|
| Results | Academic results Social results Community recognition |
| Educational Service | Planning and articulation Teaching Practices Monitoring and evaluation of teaching and learning |
| Leadership and Management | Leadership Management Self-evaluation and improvement |

Table 2 – Referential of analysis of the 2nd cycle of ESE

The redefinition of the objectives of ESE highlighted students' academic achievement and school responsibility:

- To promote the progress of students' learning and achievement, identifying strengths and areas for crucial improvement of schools' work;
- Increasing responsibility at all levels, validating schools' self-evaluation practices;
- Fostering the schools participation in the educational community and local society, offering better knowledge of schools' work;

- Contributing to the regulation of education, endowing educational policy makers and school administrators with pertinent information (IGEC, 2012).

Despite all the debatable aspects we have considered, we believe ESE also contains a strong potential as an elicitor of school change and improvement:

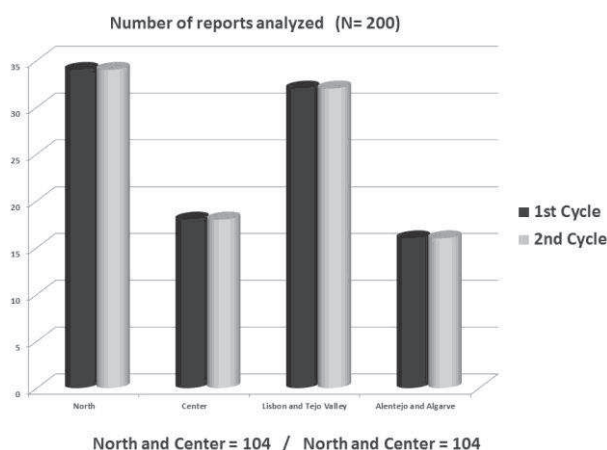
Even if the purpose of evaluation is conditioned by accountability (Taubman, 2009; Schuetze & Mendiola, 2012), (...) institutional evaluation can never be dissociated from its formative aspect, that is, in the words of Belloni and Belloni (2003), of a transformative and constructive component (Pacheco, Seabra, Morgado & VanHattum, 2012).

It is our assumption that ESE does have consequences for schools, both because the production of a public report may help identify areas for improvement (more recently, leading to the mandatory drafting of a plan for improvement) and because schools, when preparing for evaluation and aiming to obtain better results, strive to approach the model of quality depicted in the ESE referential. Once reports are public, they induce processes of school comparison and impact potential users of the schools' service, creating a quasi-market and producing peer pressure processes, similarly to the process of comparison between countries defined in the Lisbon Strategy for the European level – the open method of coordination (European Council, 2000).

We focused our attention on the documental analysis of ESE reports of both cycles, in order to infer effects and impacts on curricular and pedagogical practices at the evaluated schools, identifying tendencies for change and improvement.

3. Methodology

Data gathering was made from a selection of ESE reports produced in both cycles of evaluation, representing 40% of all schools evaluated twice in the five geographical areas considered by the General Inspection of Education and Science (North, Center, Lisbon and Tejo Valley, Alentejo and Algarve). Half of all reports considered correspond to schools with the highest classifications, and the remaining half to schools with the lowest classifications. 200 reports were analyzed, distributed as described in graphic 1.



Graphic 1 – Distribution of reports analyzed

The analysis of these reports focused on the Educational Service dimension, namely on the curricular and pedagogical changes observed in schools, and was done by content analysis, using the NVivo 10 software, with predetermined categories, as described in table 3



| Categories | Subcategories |
|--|--|
| Differentiation and pedagogical support | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Special Educational Needs •Cultural Diversity •Others |
| Accompaniment and supervision of teaching practice | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Lecture/teaching practice observation •Teaching practice observation – Teachers' professional development •Teaching practice observation – Teachers' sharing and reflecting •Teaching practice observation – Improvement of learning/achievement |
| Curriculum articulation and sequence | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Sequence among teaching levels/courses •Content articulation (vertical and horizontal) •Articulation with the community •Articulation of procedures/practices •Others |
| Evaluation and assessment of learning | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Criteria •Diversity |
| Experimental activity | |

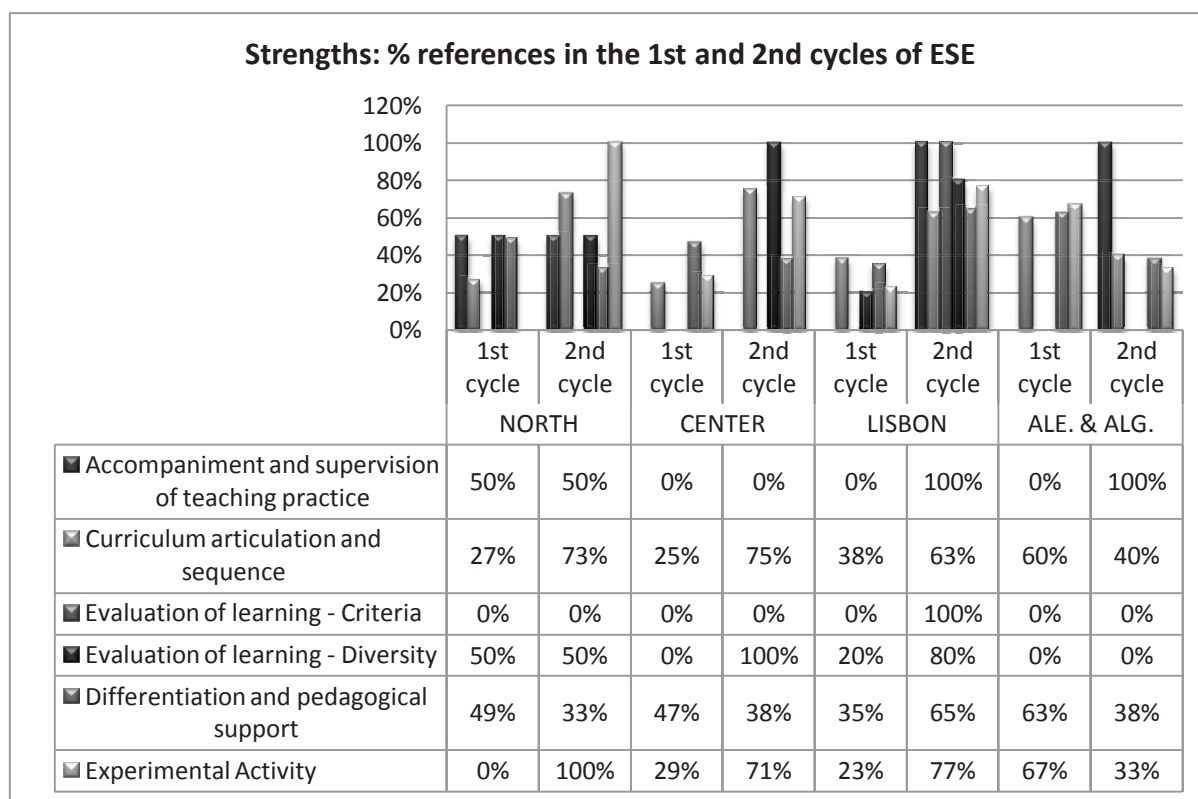
Table 3 – Categories and subcategories of content analysis – Curricular and Pedagogical changes

4. Results and discussion

The presentation and discussion of results are made taking into account the research questions outlined in the beginning of this text, and the number of references to each of the categories considered in each cycle of ESE.

4.1. Strengths

The number of references to strengths – that is – areas in which the school's performance is deemed of (very) high quality – considered in the reports is included in Graphic 2.



Graphic 2 – Strengths

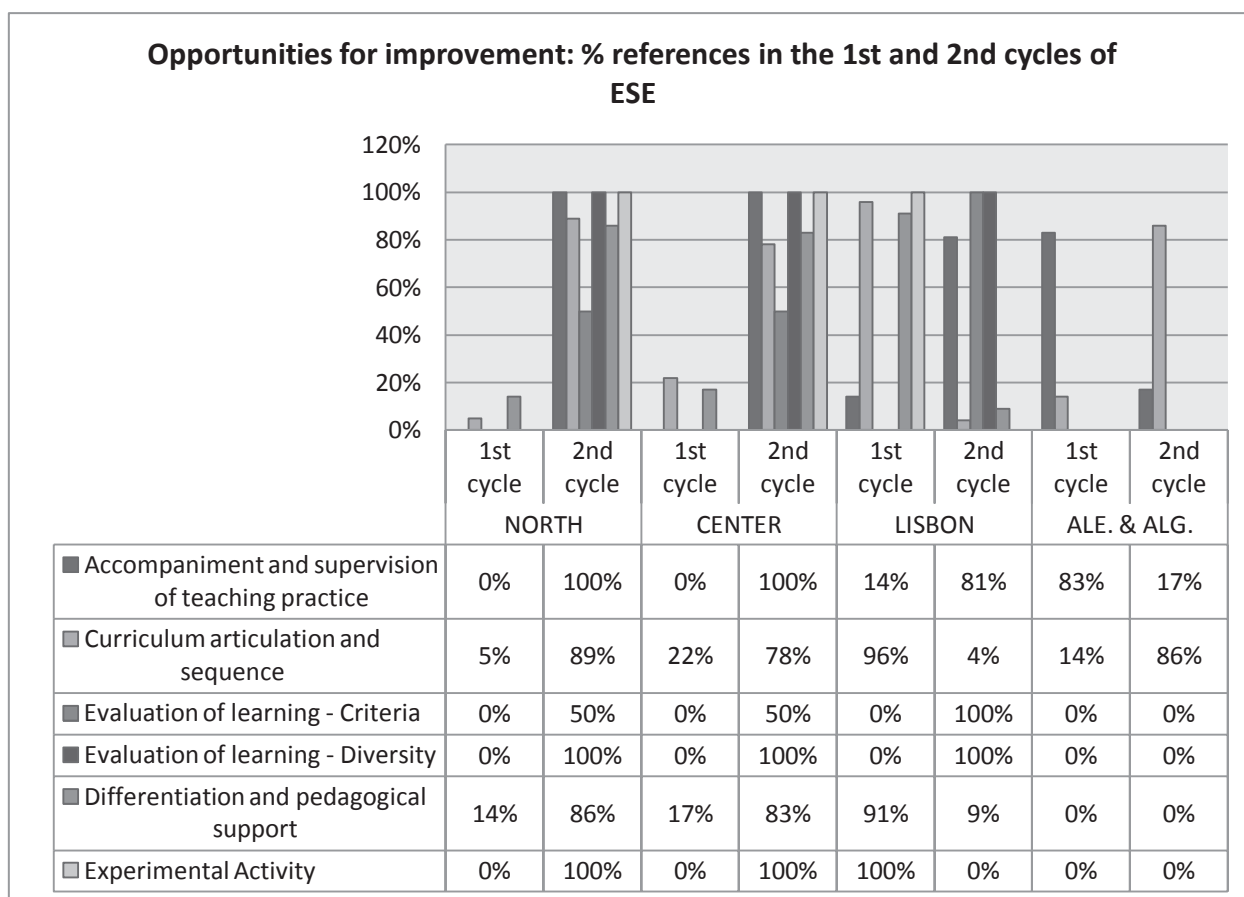
Data gathered allows us to verify the most referred strength concerns ***Differentiation and pedagogical support***, which demonstrates these are solid practices in many schools, which value differences among students and support those with greater difficulties. The number of references to this area is slightly larger in the 1st cycle of ESE, although the difference is not significant. It is also noteworthy that differentiation and pedagogical support, issues concerning special needs are more often referred than cultural diversity – stressing, in this case, strategies for inclusion, equality, equity and social justice – and a several other aspects and actions aiming to optimize the range of educational options, improving learning, reconfiguring teaching practice and curricular enrichment activities.

Next in percentage of references as strengths are ***Curriculum Articulation and Sequence*** and ***Experimental Activity***, central aspects for the development of teaching and learning activities. Data reveals a higher percentage of references to these aspects in the 2nd cycle of ESE (except for the Alentejo and Algarve region) which allows for the inference that many schools have invested in these areas since they were first evaluated. In the case of curriculum articulation and sequence, in order of importance, the following aspects were mentioned: (i) sequence between grades/levels of teaching; (ii) articulation of contents; (iii) articulation of procedures/teaching practices and (iv) articulation with the community. As these references allow us to hypothesize, a clear precedence is given to the cognitive dimension, visible in how contents are sequenced and articulated with one another.

Lastly, the strength in the third position, concerning percentage of references is ***Evaluation and Assessment of Learning***, especially referencing diversity of instruments and means of evaluation. We should also clarify that this aspect is not mentioned as a strength in reports from Alentejo and Algarve, and that evaluation with reference to criteria is only referred as a strength in schools of Lisbon and Tejo Valley. Such facts lead to the deduction that, being a structuring dimension of teaching and learning processes, evaluation and assessment are consolidated practices in most schools. Only some ESE teams may have felt the need to underline this dimension, either as a strength or as an opportunity for improvement.

4.2. Opportunities for improvement

The percentage of references to opportunities for improvement – that is, areas onto which schools should direct their efforts for improvement as priorities – in the reports we analyzed, are shown in Graphic 3.



Graphic 3 –Opportunities for Improvement

Among opportunities for improvement, **Curricular articulation and sequence** and **Accompaniment and Supervision of Teaching Practice** are the most frequently referred aspects in the reports we analyzed. In what concerns *curriculum articulation and sequence*, references appear almost exclusively in the second cycle of ESE, with the exception of the Alentejo and Algarve region, where the opposite happens. Aspects mentioned, from the most to the least frequent, were: (i) sequence between grades/levels, (ii) contents articulation (vertical and horizontal), (iii) articulation with the community and (iv) articulation of procedures/ teaching practices. Regarding *accompaniment and supervision of teaching practice*, it is more frequently references in the second cycle of ESE, except for the Lisbon region. In its scope, issues mentioned, from the most to the least frequent were: (i) observation of teaching practice, (ii) observation of teaching practices/classes and its effects on teachers' professional development, (iii) observation of teaching practices/classes as procedure for sharing and reflection by teachers, and (iv) observation of teaching practices/classes related to the improvement of students' achievement and learning.

After the category most referenced in reports, after considering the ones already mentioned, is **Differentiation and pedagogical support**. In the regions of the North and Center, this category is most referenced in the 1st cycle of ESE, however in Lisbon it most mentioned in the 2nd cycle and in Alentejo and Algarve it was never mentioned. When it comes to the investments schools should privilege to improve differentiation and pedagogical support, they concern (i) Special Needs education, in the first place, and (ii) cultural diversity and (iii) pedagogical support for children with lower achievement next.

Areas for improvement also include, ordered from the most frequently mentioned to the least frequently mentioned: **Evaluation and assessment of learning by reference to criteria** and **Evaluation and assessment of learning referencing diversity**, both referenced only in the 2nd cycle and absent in reports from Alentejo and Algarve.

Lastly, the reference to **Experimental Activity**, is expressed differently in each cycle and geographical context: In the North and Center it is only referenced in the 2nd cycle, in Lisbon only in the 1st cycle and in Alentejo and Algarve it is never mentioned.

4.3. Curricular and pedagogical changes



When analyzing the evolution of **Strengths** related to curricular and pedagogical changes between cycles of ESE, we verify:

- a) *Differentiation and pedagogical support* are the most frequently acknowledged strengths, particularly in schools with the lowest classifications. There are no significant differences between cycles in this regard;
- b) *Experimental activity* is significantly more referenced in 2nd cycle reports than in 1st cycle reports, except for Alentejo and Algarve;
- c) There is a small increase in references to *Curriculum articulation and sequence* as a strength in the 2nd cycle, except for the reports from Alentejo and Algarve;
- d) *Accompaniment and supervision of teaching practice* is referred slightly more frequently in the 2nd cycle in reports from Lisbon and Alentejo and Algarve;
- e) Evaluation and assessment of learning, by reference to diversity is more referenced in the 2nd cycle, which is significant particularly in the Center and Lisbon areas.

Regarding the evolution of **Opportunities for improvement** concerning curricular and pedagogical changes, we note:

- a) *Accompaniment and supervision of teaching practice* and *Curriculum articulation and sequence* are significantly recognized as areas for improvement in the 2nd cycle of ESE, except for Alentejo and Algarve;
- b) Although it is recognized as a strength in many schools, *Differentiation and Pedagogical support* is still referenced as an area for improvement, particularly in the North and Center;
- c) *Evaluation and Assessment of learning* – both when considering criteria or diversity – are almost ignored in the 1st cycle but gain expression in the 2nd, except for Alentejo and Algarve.

5. Conclusion

Generally, data have revealed an evolution both of strengths and opportunities for improvement from the 1st to the 2nd cycle of ESE indicative of a positive impact we can consider to emerge from this process of school evaluation. In particular, the analysis of opportunities for improvement the comparative analysis of reports from both cycles allowed us to detect changes within each school, revealing an evolution based on the effects and impacts of external evaluation.

Also noteworthy is the fact that some of the opportunities for improvement pointed out in the 1st cycle of ESE – such as pedagogical differentiation and support and Accompaniment and supervision of teaching practice in several geographical regions – are now acknowledged in the 2nd cycle as strengths, allowing us to infer ESE does have impacts and is capable of producing significant impacts on curricular and pedagogical practices taking place in schools.

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